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U.S., China Jointly Track Firings of Soviet Missiles

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WASHINGTON—Two U.S. equipped intelligence stations, manned by Chinese technicians and situated in remote mountains in northwestern China, have been secretly monitoring Soviet missile firings, U.S. sources confirmed Thursday.

The stations, one of which began operating last fall, were built to substitute for the U.S. electronic listening posts in northern Iran that were lost when the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power early in 1979.

In fact, they provide somewhat better data, one source said, partly because of the quality of the atmosphere through which they watch Soviet activities and partly because they monitor much of the trajectory of the missiles from their launching points in Soviet Central Asia out to the Kamchatka Peninsula and Pacific Ocean impact points.

News of the electronic stations

has leaked out piecemeal, beginning in September, 1980. From the start, political factors seemed to have played a part in the disclosures.

Sources are now concerned that, in addition to angering the Soviets, the news stories could cause Peking to limit or even end the secret agreement under which the stations operate, as well as preclude installation of new equipment that could monitor more military-related activities inside Soviet territory.

The first public disclosure of a secret Sino-American intelligence pact came in the Sept. 15, 1980, issue of New York magazine. It said the deal, reached about January, 1980, provided for U.S. equipment to be delivered to China to intercept radio signals from missile firings and returning space satellites.

That article credited "intelligence sources," who include a staff member of the National Security Council in the Carter White House. The sources, in leaking the information, complained that Ronald Reagan's pro-Taiwan statements in the campaign were endangering the secret deal. But they also apparently were intended to help defeat Reagan in the election.

The current stories, sparked by an NBC News report Wednesday, were seen by a former Carter Administration official as deliberate

leaks by the Reagan White House to blunt criticism of its new policy on arms sales to Peking.

The same official suggested that the present Administration intended to show that the Carter Administration entered into a more significant military relationship with the Chinese government—secret cooperation on intelligence—than was indicated by its new policy of agreeing "in principle" to sell defensive arms to Peking.

Peking is certain to be upset now, sources said, even though China's key leader, Deng Xiaoping, powerful vice chairman of the Communist Party, was quoted several times in 1979 as telling U.S. congressmen that China was willing to allow its territory to be used for listening posts that would substitute for those lost in Iran.

"That is not the same thing as saying the stations are working," one source insisted, "and even if the Soviets knew the stations were working, this is rubbing Moscow's nose in it."

The U.S.-equipped stations in China, whose data is shared with the Peking government, are located in the Xinjiang region that abuts Soviet Kazakhstan. They are somewhat farther from the key Soviet missile test range at Tyuratam (or Leninsk) than the stations in Iran were but closer to another Soviet launch facility, at Sary-Shagan.

Among new equipment that might be installed in the future are seismic and radiation instruments to monitor Soviet underground nuclear tests as well as special cameras to photograph Soviet satellites that return from orbit in Kazakhstan.

CIA personnel trained the Chinese technicians and periodically visit the stations to advise the personnel and probably to service the equipment if necessary.